

# The Archaeology of Japan: From the Earliest Rice Farming Villages to the Rise of the State, by Koji Mizoguchi.

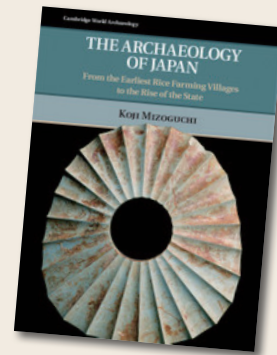
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## BOOK REVIEW

*The Archaeology of Japan:  
From the Earliest Rice Farming  
Villages to the Rise of the State*

**Koji Mizoguchi**

Cambridge University Press, 2013  
385 pages. ISBN 9780521884907 (hardback), 9780521711883 (paperback)



This lengthy and dense book will take any reader, myself included, a long, long time to assimilate: it is a masterful assemblage of data and interpretations, many never before expressed in English. I welcome it not only for its revelations but also because it was written by a Japanese scholar: it is time they spoke for themselves without having their works passed through a foreign scholar's mind. However, Mizoguchi offers this work as an "intervention" for "illustrating to the international audience the potential and excitement of the study of the Yayoi and Kofun periods," because he thinks "the periods have not attracted as much international interest as the Jomon period" (p. xviii). With this sweeping statement he dismisses much good work by foreign scholars (Barnes, Chard, Edwards, Farris, Hudson, Kidder, Pearson, Piggott, Seyock...), as well as many Japanese writing in English. Far better to have said he was taking this opportunity to apply Niklas Luhmann's social system theory to Japanese prehistory.

Although published in large format hardback, this is neither an introductory text nor a coffee table book: there are no color pictures. Instead we have an academic text written in a philosophical manner with overt self-reflexivity. Contextualizations in theory, the practice of archaeology in Japan, the environment and the East Asian setting are introduced in Chapters 2–4; period dates are not given until Table 3.1, which might make it frustrating for his intended "international audience." The chronology and environment sections are poorly presented in choice of terms and explanations. Mizoguchi's definitions of relative and absolute dating are unusual, while radiocarbon and its relation to climate are not well explained. A great disappointment is his decision not to engage in the debate about the controversial radiocarbon dates for the beginning of Yayoi. He is therefore forced to use the relative pottery scheme to frame discussion.

Archaeological writings on the Kofun period in Japan today, he says, generally feature "Marxist-influenced interpretations" and/or "references to descriptions" in the eighth century chronicles. He himself, to explain social change, eschews a traditional Marxist focus on contradictions between the "the force of production and the relations of production" (Fig. 3.2A) in favor of the social systems theory of Luhmann (Fig. 3.2B). Although growing out of structuralist-functionalist systems theory by Talcott Parsons, Luhmann's theory incorporates the biology of cognition and cybernetics. In simple terms (see Knodt's foreword), Luhmann sees the social world divided into horizontal layers (treated by Mizoguchi

as settlement or burial systems, etc.) that are self-organizing. When these layers come into contact, they generate meaning through communication between systems; when in conflict, they generate simplifying mechanisms that reorganize relations.

Chapters 5–11 analyze the Yayoi and Kofun periods in terms of contradictions between these spheres, tracking the hierarchization of society through a multitude of regional data. Early on, Mizoguchi postulates that rice and the dead are associated through mutual qualities of relating to life and reproduction (explained through Yayoi infants being buried in jars originally destined to store rice, p. 59). Transferring this ideology to elites and their burials in the Kofun period, he maintains that burial rituals, including the construction of large tombs by community members, affirm the leader's role in representing community interests and ensuring wellbeing. I personally rejected an earlier version of these ideas in *State Formation in Japan* (p. 125), while offering an alternative explanation for the rise of the mounded tomb culture (Barnes 2007, chapter 8, and 2011, and Barnes' essay in this volume)—with which Mizoguchi has failed to engage.

Does Luhmann's theory of systems communications work for Japanese prehistory? One can see how Mizoguchi applied this theory to account for social stratification and hierarchization. But he departs from Luhmann on the personal level. Luhmann specifically dissociates individuals from systems operations: language is important only in that things are said (not their content), while individual actions are important only in their *attribution* to individuals or to the situation (Knodt 1995). While Luhmann excludes the personal (perhaps this is why Knodt calls him “post humanist”), Mizoguchi foregrounds people's “thoughts, feelings and memories”—as evidenced by his “rice as death” idea, and by his constant claims of what prehistoric people thought and how they were concerned with their “identity.” These are concepts in post-processualist archaeology, not in post humanism.

Stronger editorial control could have improved this book, particularly in ensuring that the content is readily understandable to two very different audiences (Japanologists and general archaeologists). Inconsistent transliteration of both Chinese and Korean words and other minor problems with English can be overlooked, but Mizoguchi is renowned for his complicated writing style (in both English and Japanese—perhaps because he is reading Luhmann). It was often difficult to follow the formal logic of his interpretations and the sequential logic of his data presentations. Figures are arranged out of order with references in the text, and chapter sub-sections not only have an idiosyncratic numbering system, but are not even listed in the Table of Contents—rather necessary for a 70 page chapter.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, however, for anyone interested in the details of Japanese protohistoric archaeology and how Luhmann's communications theory is deployed in hypothesizing reasons for change and restructuring of rice agricultural society, this book is food for thought. I laud Mizoguchi for such prolific scholarship, evidencing much thought and effort, and for writing astoundingly well in a foreign language.

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1 See instead my full listing at: [https://www.academia.edu/6494598/Mizoguchi13\\_Expanded\\_ToC](https://www.academia.edu/6494598/Mizoguchi13_Expanded_ToC).

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**Reviewed by Gina L. Barnes**